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ABSTRACT

This handbook provides information for the prospective sponsors of Indochinese refugees. The refugees' general background, experiences, and reasons for coming to the United States are discussed. The sponsor's importance and role in the resettlement program are examined. The handbook also outlines problems of adjustment to life in America and what help in this regard refugees will expect from their sponsors. Cultural differences and the part they play in sponsorship are analysed. The handbook includes a practical checklist of tasks that must be done for refugees and basic items they will require on arrival. (APM).

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HANDBOOK FOR SPONSORS OF INDOCHINESE REFUGEES

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Why are sponsors so important in the resettlement effort?

Over three hundred thousand Indochinese refugees presently crowd the dismal, make-shift camps in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, while still others are struggling for food and housing in Hong Kong or waiting aimlessly in Filipino waystations. Approximately 14,000 of these refugees are technically eligible to enter the United States each month, but in reality they are allowed to leave only as fast as the American voluntary resettlement agencies are able to handle them. The ability of these agencies to resettle the Indochinese refugees depends primarily on the number of private individuals and groups who volunteer to sponsor one or more refugees. By cooperating with the voluntary agencies in their resettlement effort, you make it possible for refugees to leave the camps, where food, clothing, housing and medical care are in short supply, as quickly as possible, to begin a new life of hope and human dignity in this country.

Sponsors make a moral -- not a legal -- commitment. You will never be asked to sign a contract, promise an absolute amount of time, or pledge so many dollars or goods. Rather, as a sponsor you will be asked to do as much as you feel you can, working alongside agency caseworkers, to help the refugee and his family get a good start in America.

As an American sponsor you can play a very special role in making the Indochinese refugees feel welcome and comfortable in their new country. Refugees are people without a country, a home or belongings, and they arrive feeling dispossessed and unwanted. It can be a tremendous psychological boost to be met at the airport by a smiling, friendly American who will continue to help them in their first difficult weeks and months, thereby saying to them, "We are glad you are here."

As a sponsor, you can also aid the resettlement effort by passing the word to others in your community or congregation about the plight of these unfortunate people and how other Americans could help. Sponsors are in a unique position both to introduce the Indochinese refugees to America and to introduce Americans to the Indochinese.

Who are the Indochinese Refugees?

Refugees from Indochina -- the French colonial term for Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos -- have been coming to the United States since the fall of Saigon in April, 1975. The first waves of refugees were mostly Vietnamese, educated, urban and with connections to either the fallen South Vietnamese govenment or the American presence. The 1975-1977 trickle of Indochinese refugees became a torrent in 1978 as unrelenting famine, continuous fighting and political repression forced vast numbers of refugees over the Thai border or onto the seas in small, overcrowded boats.

Beside the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao nationals, many ethnic Chinese from all three countries and various highland tribal peoples such as the Lao Hmong and Yao have also had to flee intolerable conditions and political reprisals. Thus, not only do the refugees come from a wide range of economic and educational levels, but each group has its own language, traditions, history and strong cultural pride. More recent arrivals are less literate and more culturally traditional than the original 1975 refugees, and therefore in even greater need of your assistance.

What kind of experiences have they had?

Most of the refugees have survived a frightening and stressful escape to safety and freedom. Unlike immigrants, they were often unable to weigh the alternatives between staying and leaving, but had to make choices quickly, when opportunities existed. Others planned carefully for their flight, convinced that given the economic and political situation in their homeland, their only chance for survival lay in escape. Still others, like the Hmong who fought with the Americans or the ethnic Chinese who possessed businesses and capital, were forced out by armed troops or national policy.

Whether they escaped by boat or land, the refugees' casualty rate en route was perhaps fifty percent. The "boat people" (mostly Vietnamese and Chinese Vietnamese) were plagued by overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels, unpredictable seas, and ruthless Thai pirates. The "land" refugees (the Hmong, Lao and Cambodians) raced hostile patrols, aerial attacks of bombs and gas, and a perilous river crossing as they fled across the Mekong into Thailand.

And then there were months, sometimes years of waiting in the overcrowded, dirty camps of first asylum in Thailand, Malaysia and on scattered Indonesian islands where food, water, medical supplies and personnel, and living space are too often in tragically short supply.

How do they come to the United States?

Each refugee who manages to reach a camp is interviewed first by a United Nations representative to establish that he meets internationally agreed upon requirements for refugee status. Representatives of various countries which accept Indochinese refugees periodically tour the camps, interviewing and selecting refugees following national guidelines. The United States gives priority to people with family in America, and then to people who have worked with our government.

Once a refugee is accepted by the United States government his name is provided to a committee composed of representatives of the national voluntary agencies (VOLAGs) who receive and administer State Department grants for resettling Indochinese refugees. In turn, the responsibility for and implementation of actual resettlement activities are passed by the national office on to a local VOLAG which agrees to accept each new case.

Once the local VOLAG accepts the refugee, an Indochinese caseworker and/or an American sponsor is assigned to the case. The arrival date is seldom known more than a couple of weeks in advance, and, more typically, there is only a couple of days or even a couple of hours notice! Sometimes an expected arrival is postponed due to a "medical hold" at the port of departure in Southeast Asia, only to arrive days or weeks later.

What do they expect from you?

Most refugees are aware of the sponsorship system and feel that their chances for a smooth resettlement are better if they have a sponsor. Therefore, even though the individual or family you are sponsoring will not know about you until they get off the plane, they will be pleased and relieved to meet you.

However, they may have unrealistic expectations of what you can or are going to do for them, and they almost certainly will have difficulty understanding that you have no legal responsibility or control over them. If your agency caseworker goes with you to the airport, he/she can correct any misconceptions and dispel any fears the refugees might have about sponsorship.

How will the refugees react to life in this country?

Indochinese refugees are survivors, and as survivors they tend to be resilient, determined and strong. Nevertheless, they are also psychologically tired, and when they encounter the inevitable difficulties and occasional setbacks, they will need your help and support. If you can understand and appreciate what they have gone through and how they are likely to feel when they arrive, you will be able to ease their transition from Southeast Asia to the United States.

1. At the airport the refugees are likely to be tired, confused, and frightened. Remember that these people have just completed a long and tiring trans-Pacific flight. A degree of fatigue, confusion, and time disorientation is natural as the human body-clock struggles to readjust itself. It takes three to seven days before most people begin to function well again after a major time change.

2. Culture shock is real, and probably inevitable to some degree. The first recognition of different cultural ways may be at the airport, when you meet your sponsorees for the first time. They will be reserved and polite, no matter how happy they are to be here; to show their emotions overtly would be bad taste. But in time they will become used to our more extroverted American culture, and you will not misread reserve for fear or disapproval.

How we express ourselves is just one example of the cause of culture shock. If you have ever traveled to another culture, or moved to a different area, you can probably remember how difficult is was to find your way around and find out how things were done in the new place. Finding oneself in the middle of a new culture leads to disorientation, a sense of inadequacy and ineffectiveness, and feelings of isolation. Some of the common symptoms of culture shock are:

- time disorientation
- unusual fatigue
- crying easily
- extreme mood swings
- fear amd withdrawal
- nervousness
- restlessness
- distress over small matters (bugs, lack of a special food, dirt)
- antagonistic attitudes toward the new culture and people

The danger signs are degree and persistence. Immigrants and refugees occasionally display adjustment difficulties in the form of depression, extreme anxiety, or feelings of paranoia. These feelings are sometimes expressed psychosomatically as recurring headaches or digestive problems. However, as a group the Indochinese refugees have adjusted well and easily and any serious trouble is unusual.

3. Each refugee's story is unique, but it is safe to say that even the most fortunate arrive in America feeling lost and disoriented. Most of the refugees have lost family members and friends; their grieving process is often complicated by not knowing if other loved ones are alive or dead. All of the

refugees have lost possessions, their jobs, and their home. This combination of loss of family, friends, possessions, homeland, status, profession and security leads to a loss of identity. A certain degree of homesickness and difficulty in planning ahead is inevitable since the refugees are forced to struggle with a new situation even before they have had a chance to deal adequately with their losses. On the other hand, the novelty, excitement, and promise of life in America help to capture their interest and to bring out the remarkable coping capabilities of the refugees.

Research and experience with the Indochinese refugees suggest that if there are to be emotional problems, characteristically they will surface six months to a year after the refugee's arrival in America. The mourning process for lost relatives, friends, country, and identity may not begin in earnest until the initial excitement of arrival has dissipated and immediate survival needs are met. Perhaps it is only then that many refugees can take stock of all that has happened to them and begin to deal with the real challenges of starting life over in a new country.

What can sponsors do for refugees? (see appendices A and B)

Because no two sponsors (or sponsoring groups) have exactly the same interests or resources, and no two refugees have exactly the same needs, it's difficult to be specific about what sponsorship will mean for you and the family you sponsor. However, typical tasks include meeting the refugees at the airport, making sure that short-term and long-term housing needs are met, and arranging school registration, social security numbers, and health check-ups. As a sponsor, you will also spend some time showing the refugees how to get around the city and depending on the refugees' background, you will spend a lot or a little time educating them about life in a complex Western environment (which household products are poisonous, how to use Western plumbing, how to pay bills, etc.). You will spend some time and probably a little money the first few weeks to get the family going.

You may or may not develop a long-lasting relationship with the refugees you sponsor. Some people really hit it off, others don't. Some refugees quickly become independent; others need longer term assistance. Many refugees rapidly meet fellow countrymen and turn to formal and informal ethnic associations for assistance and comaraderie. Typically, the refugee family and the sponsor eventually develop a comfortable relationship based on getting together for each other's holidays and occasional parties or outings. At some point, by mutual agreement and desire, you may stop seeing each other and just exchange New Year's cards. On the other hand, you may remain close for years to come. In other words, there are many scenarios that make for successful sponsorship. Some of you might get one family settled and then return to sponsor again!

How can sponsors best help refugees adjust to life in America?

Refugees, like everybody else, have emotional as well as physical needs. As a sponsor you can help a refugee family eat and keep warm, and you can also help them feel secure and good about themselves and their new country.

You can usually help people best by doing things with them rather than for them. All of us have a need to feel competent and effective in our environment. The people you are sponsoring were capable, functioning adults in their own societies, and they will eventually become competent, productive Americans. But for the meantime we must remember that most refugees have lost not only family members and their homeland, but also their sense of competency and self-respect. You can assist them to regain their confidence if you are sensitive to their feelings of frustration and inadequacy. You can help by tactfully providing information about American culture and society, without judgemental comparisons between their ways and ours. Gently protect them from mistakes which will cause embarrassment or shame; (for instance, pajamas are not appropriate street wear in this country) and pave the way a bit for their first attempts at independence and getting around on their own (call the school office and let them know when to expect the refugee family, or be sure they have a map clearly marked with their address and your telephone number in case they should get lost).

Keep in mind that the refugees are likely to be experiencing a combination of grief, loss, jet-lag, and culture shock when they arrive. Some depression is unavoidable. As a sponsor you can sometimes help by just being there, letting them know that you are glad they are here and accepting them as they are. An important way you can help is by letting them adjust to American life according to their own timetable, not yours. You shouldn't take it as a personal failure or a sign of rejection if the family or individual you are helping seems slow to feel happy and secure in this country.

Finally, the refugee will be more comfortable if you do not need or expect him to thank you directly for all you are doing. Such direct expression of emotion is contrary to the way Indochinese are taught, and he or she will prefer to thank you in little, indirect ways. Be sure you accept their favors, for that is how you can say "you're welcome."

What role do cultural differences play in sponsorship?

When people of different cultures interact, confusion is a common result. Misunderstandings -- funny and sometimes not-so-funny -- happen because we have different values, beliefs, expectations and ways of thinking, perceiving and communicating.

In working with the Indochinese we must keep in mind that they often see and evaluate situations differently than we do. We can teach them about our culture, but only while respecting theirs. We can give them advice, but only while remembering that they are adults who have the right to make their own decisions (even if thse decisions seem mistaken to us). After all, a decision different from the one you would have them make is not a sign of ingratitude, but a testimony to their strong determination to be independent and self-sufficient and to the vitality of their cultural beliefs.

It is possible that at some point there will be real misunderstanding. It is hard enough to communicate effectively with other Americans, even with our friends and family members! With people from another culture, the key to good understanding is to work a little harder at making sure messages are what they seem. And if a misunderstanding does occur, we just try a bit harder, setting things straight and remembering, as we move ahead, that both sponsor and refugee are doing their best and recognize the need to forgive the other's blunders.

Since Indochinese refugees come from several countries and ethnic groups, it is difficult--even misleading--to speak of "Indochinese customs." However, there are some general differences between American culture and that of Southeast Asia which might be useful to keep in mind.

1. Communication styles. All cultures have sets of rules and norms which govern the form and structure of interpersonal communication. These rules and norms (of which people are rarely consciously aware) determine how we talk, what we talk about, whom we talk to, and the non-verbal aspects of communication such as how close we stand when we talk and how much eye-contact we make. Thus Americans, compared to Indochinese, ask a lot of personal questions, are uncomfortable with silence, make considerable eye contact, stand close to people of the opposite sex, and argue quite freely. Conversely, compared to Americans, Indochinese tend to answer "yes" to all direct questions, avoid eye contact (particularly with the opposite sex), smile incessantly, seldom admit disagreement, and hide their feelings of anger, joy, and sorrow.

2. Food. Taste in food is learned at a very early age. Though, of course, refugees are grateful just to have enough food to eat, and though they are often eager to try American dishes, they also will appreciate very much the opportunity to eat familiar foods such as Oriental rice, noodles, familiar fruits and vegetables, soy sauce and fish sauce, fish, pork, and chicken. You will probably want to have some of these ingredients and some chopsticks available for the family when they arrive. If the family will be living with you for a while it may be best to offer them certain hours in the kitchen when they can prepare their own food and eat together as a family without the strain of a foreign language and foreign customs. It will also indicate respect for their privacy, and will help to preserve your own. Introducing them to an Asian food store may be one of the first and most important kindnesses of all.

3. Child rearing. In general, Indochinese parents appear to be more indulgent than Americans. This may be partly due to an Asian reticence to discipline children in public. Rural refugees may seem less concerned about keeping small children dressed around the house than the average middle-class American, and in this matter, as in some others, you will want to educate the refugees about American beliefs and standards while respecting their ways but with an eye to saving them embarrassment at a later time. Sometimes an Indochinese caseworker or more experienced refugee is well suited to explain American customs in a non-threatening manner.

4. Sex roles. Women's liberation, for better or worse, has not yet hit Southeast Asia. Indochinese refugees will almost certainly believe that the man should make decisions for his family, "bring home the bacon" (or rice), and represent his family to the outside world. Also, relations between the sexes are not nearly as free and spontaneous in Indochina as in the America of the 1980's. Indochinese men may, for example, find it awkward at first to relate directly to an American woman, and Indochinese women are likely to be hesitant to deal directly with an American man. Considerable family strain may be introduced if the wife is able to get a job before the husband. American public display of affection between the sexes may seem strange or embarrassing to Indochinese refugees. On the other hand, in Indochina there is more affectionate touching than we are used to between members of the same sex.

5. Family. In general, Indochinese are very family oriented. For them family means the extended family of siblings, grandparents, in-laws, nephews, and nieces. Indochinese also believe in having many children, so it is not uncommon for family groups of eight or ten to want to live together. Large enough apartments are hard to come by, and American society in general is often unprepared to accommodate large extended families. It should also be kept in mind that, for Indochinese, family ties are continuous throughout the life cycle; teenagers and grown children remain integral, responsible family members. Generally, age is highly respected in Indochina and the opinions of parents and grandparents carry more weight in an Indochinese family than they would in an average American family.

6. Saving face. Indochinese are very conscious of saving face, and they will try extremely hard to avoid embarrassment and confrontation. To them Americans seem quite blunt, undiplomatic or even impolite. They value harmony and a feeling of mutual goodwill over getting things done quickly. They will be friendly but real friendship and trust comes slowly in Asia. You may want to avoid asking too many personal questions for awhile, and resist the temptation to "talk things out" or otherwise confront too directly any misunderstandings or disagreements that may arise.

Their emphasis on pride and saving face also makes it awkward for them to accept handouts and charity. The refugees know they are in no position to refuse help, but they are unused to turning to anyone but family when in need. This pride may make them uneasy living in an American family's home too long. Also, it is often more comfortable for them to rely on the Federal Refugee Relief Assistance our Congress has provided for refugees rather than on the largesse of individuals.

7. Education and employment. Asians place a high value on education. Also, they tend to think of employment and occupation as relatively permanent. Some refugees will thus want to get vocational training and other education at first, rather than settling for a low-paying, entry-level job. These refugees need to be helped to understand the fluidity of the American employment system, and counseled into taking jobs with room for advancement and training over higher paid dead-end jobs. Jewish Vocational Service, Truman College's Indochinese program and the Korean American Service League offer bilingual employment counseling to refugees. Some of the refugees will be physically and emotionally unable to work effectively for the first few months after leaving the horrors of flight behind them. These are the people the Refugee Assistance Act was created to serve. They can receive assistance following public aid guidelines, including a "green card" for medical care and food stamps until they are able to get their feet on the ground.

Arranging employment for refugees must be assessed on a case by case basis. For some refugees it may be best to use public assistance in the first few months after their arrival if it will mean they can attend English language and vocational training classes which will make them financially independent in the long run. On the other hand, many refugees adjust to American life more quickly by starting to work--and thereby to feel competent and useful--within the first month or so of their arrival.

8. Living in an industrialized society. Increasingly the refugees arriving in America are rural, uneducated, and unacquainted with the ways and things of a modern industrial society. Many Lao Hmong and Cambodian refugees in particular will benefit from tactful demonstrations on how to operate appliances,

showers, toilets, and faucets, how to use the phone (including calling emergency numbers) and how to contact relatives and friends in this country, abroad, and in South East Asia. All refugees will need some information and assistance to master the complexities of banking, taxes, bill paying and public transportation. Refugees may need help to register each January at a post office with the United States Immigration and Nationalization Service. American forms, receipts, and cards may be baffling at first, so you may want to help keep papers in order. The I-94 card should be duplicated and copies kept on hand by both you and the refugee.

Why sponsor a refugee?

Being aware of your motivations can increase your effectiveness as a sponsor and a helper to the newly arrived refugee. Motives, whether idealistic, selfish, political or sentimental, have a way of occasionally getting out of hand and becoming goals in and of themselves; keeping a perspective on your reasons for sponsoring will help you realize your objective of helping the refugee, whether or not he meets your personal preferences or expectations, to settle happily and productively in this country.

With the exception of some rather obviously poor motives, such as hoping to get cheap household labor or make religious converts, most of the reasons sponsors decide to volunteer are realistic and contribute to a good sponsorship: a sense of responsibility to former allies, a feeling of indebtedness to people we feel have been wronged, an opportunity to practice a little charity and share our good fortune with some people considerably less fortunate than ourselves, a chance to meet new, interesting people and learn about another culture, a desire to feel worthwhile and the opportunity to be on the forefront of a national effort.

In the last analysis sponsorship is simultaneously an invaluable service for the refugee and a source of great satisfaction for the sponsor. By joining the voluntary agencies in the resettlement effort and helping to meet the challenge of assisting the Indochinese to adjust to American society, sponsors like you keep alive America's proud tradition as a land and a people of refuge.

APPENDIX A

TASKS THAT MUST BE ACCOMPLISHED FOR REFUGEES

There are several tasks sponsors should work on before the refugee's arrival:

1. Locating long term housing (without signing a lease if possible).

2. Locating short term housing if long term is not immediately available. Someone's home often serves as short range housing.

3. If the house or apartment is unfurnished, furniture, cooking utensils, bedding, etc., should be found.

4. In winter warm clothing will be needed in advance (most Indochinese wear smaller sizes).

5. Some food, preferably familiar to the refugees, should be available.

Most sponsors then meet the refugees at the airport.

Once the refugee arrives and is settled in his/her new home, there are several more tasks to work on:

6. Finding necessary clothing (the refugees usually arrive with little or nothing).

7. Arranging for a complete medical check-up, including a test for parasites, as soon as possible.

8. If public assistance is needed, making an appointment with the nearest Illinois Department of Public Aid office.

9. Going to get a social security card. (This is needed for employment, and also for registering for public assistance.)

10. Registering with the Illinois State Employment Office (this is also a requirement for public assistance).

11. Registering for ESL (English as a second language) classes.

12. Registering the children for school. Children need to bring along a record of their innoculations and their physical examination to register for school. All children five years old and over must go to school, but some children will need more time than others before they will be ready to begin. Some children will be ready in a few days, others may need a few weeks, and a few even longer.

13. Making arrangements for potential wage earners to get vocational counseling.

Of course the sponsor must be ready to provide other services as well which individual refugees may require.

APPENDIX B

A CHECKLIST OF BASIC ITEMS FOR ARRIVING REFUGEES

FURNITURE, APPLIANCES, ETC.
- Box springs
- Mattresses
- Kitchen table & chairs
- Lamps and lightbulbs
- Hangers

Optional:
- Dressers
- Sofa
- Draperies
- Television
- Vacuum cleaner
- Tools (hammer, screwdriver, pliers)

HOUSEHOLD ARTICLES
- Sheets and pillowcases
- Pillows
- Blankets

KITCHEN
- Pots and pans
- Bowls
- Large serving spoon or ladle
- Cups & saucers
- Glasses
- Serving bowls
- Chopsticks

Optional:
- Rice cooker
- Cleaver
- Chopping board

BATHROOM
- Towels
- Soap
- Toilet paper
- Shampoo
- Toothbrushes
- Toothpaste

FOOD
- Sugar
- Salt
- Black pepper
- Garlic
- Oil
- Vinegar
- Eggs
- Fruit (oranges, bananas, apples)
- Meat (chicken, beef, pork, fish)
- Vegetables (lettuce, tomatoes, onions)
- Rice
- Soy sauce
- Fish sauce (if possible)
- Noodles
- Ginger
- Tea
- Canned milk

MISCELLANEOUS
- Matches
- Scouring pad
- Toothpicks
- Laundry detergent
- Dishwashing detergent
- Kotex
- Pen or pencil & paper, envelopes, stamps
- Calendar
- Alarm clock
- Needle and thread
- Simple can opener

CLEANING
- Broom
- Mop
- Pail
- Kitchen cleaner
- Sponges
- Rags

AND FOR THE CHILDREN:
- Coke (a truly international item)
- Lollipops or candy
- Simple toys (ball, cars, paper & crayons, jump rope)
- Paper diapers
- Canned milk (used for formula in Southeast Asia)